

Tennessee Extension Broadcasting: Developing a Public Information Tool During Radio's Golden Years

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Public information sits in a delicate balance. On the one hand, in a free and open democracy, the government must inform people of its activities. On the other, any information activities of its agencies are open to charges of partisan propaganda (McCamy, 1939).

One federal agency that has long walked the public information tightrope is the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its affiliates in the state land-grant university system (Helms, Hiebert, Naver & Rabin, 1981). This system has a tradition of using whatever means are best suited for extending knowledge to the public.

Radio has been an integral part of that work since the medium's inception. The development of extension radio work in Tennessee is offered here to provide an historical perspective to better understand the public information role of mass media in cooperative extension work.

Origins

Extension

The land-grant system dates from the Morrill and the Land Grant College Acts of 1862. These established state-based

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agricultural research, and agricultural and mechanical education, respectively (Hambidge, 1940). In 1914, the Federal Extension Service was mandated by the Smith-Lever Act, 7 U.S.C. sec. 341 (1914):

...to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same....

With this information concept in mind, the national county agent system was instituted and support for it was developed on land-grant campuses. Pioneering Tennessee work began in 1910. Formal support from all counties was mandated by the state legislature in the Agricultural and Home Economics Act of 1928 (Annual Report, 1929).

Farm Broadcasting

The specialty of farm broadcasting is as old as American broadcasting. The USDA pioneered some of the first wireless telegraphy and radiotelephone activities with weather forecasts and market reports as early as 1900. Among the first programs on the nation's pioneer commercial radio stations were farm market reports on WHA, Madison, and KDKA, Pittsburgh. WJZ, Tuscola, Illinois, went on the air on May 19, 1921, for the express purpose of reporting grain prices (Baker, 1981).

Extension Broadcasting's Beginnings in Tennessee

Early Radio Stations

The first record of radio broadcasting stations in Tennessee is in the U.S. Department of Commerce's 1921 publication *Commercial and Government Radio Stations*. Three apparently experimental "special land stations" were listed. Three different stations were listed in 1922.

Stability in Tennessee radio came in 1923 with the establishment of WMC, Memphis. Peoples Telephone and Telegraph Company of Knoxville also put its first station, WNAN, the forerunner of WNOX (1926), on the air that year. Rounding out the early Tennessee radio scene was WOAN (1923-1929), Lawrenceburg, licensed to James Vaughn (Anderson, 1933).

Who Was Listening?

Early in 1922, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover estimated 600,000 wireless telephone receiving sets in the

nation as opposed to only 50,000 in the previous year. By 1930, Census Bureau figures showed Tennessee ranked 41st in the nation in percent of families (14.3 percent) having radio sets and 27th in total number of radios at 85,962. More importantly, for Tennessee farm broadcasting, 4.8 percent of rural farm families and 15 percent of rural nonfarm families had radios in 1930. By that year, one in seven Tennessee families had radios (Anderson, 1933).

The South lagged behind the rest of the country in radios owned due to its large rural and black populations. These groups could least afford receivers and the power to operate them. Only .8 percent of Tennessee's rural farm families reported having radio sets in 1925 (Anderson, 1933). The state of the black audience was reflected in the fact that regular extension programming for blacks in Tennessee apparently did not begin until 1946 (Baker, 1981).

The rural people to whom the Extension message was directed lived in an era far removed from today. Radio arrived in Tennessee just ahead of the society-changing Tennessee Valley Authority and other purveyors of electricity. In 1930, Tennessee's per capita income was \$306 compared to the national average of \$677 (Anderson, 1933). Extension programs of the University of Tennessee's College of Agriculture were attempting to bring farming up to subsistence levels and to bring, among other things, sanitary conditions to the homestead (*Extension Review*, 1925). In light of these conditions, the newfangled contraption, radio, was not put to full use as soon as it arrived on the scene.

County Agents and Radio

Tradition is that the first Tennessee county agricultural agent to use radio to "disseminate information" was W.M. Landess in Memphis. He developed a rural alter ego named "Hiram Hicks" and gave local Extension information, addressing local people on his "Dinner Bell" program. Landess was an agent in Shelby County from 1919 until 1934 and apparently broadcast from WREC (Sweet, 1974).

County agents very early saw the possibilities of the new medium, if it could only be made available to their clients. R. E. Bell, agent in Madison County, reported in 1922, "We had a radio receiving set at Pope's High School, which proved a very popular part of the program. The demand for radio programs from the other clubs has shown that this is going to be a new field for radio" (*Extension Review*, 1922).

The first formal mention of Extension's using radio is in the 1925 annual report for District I (West Tennessee). H. S. Nichols, district agent, reported cooperation with the Farm Service Department of the Memphis Chamber of Commerce and WMC in a radio campaign. During "Tennessee Week" (May 18-23), area agents and district staff presented talks at 12:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. each day. He was "informed that we talked to at least 80,000 people at each discussion," and comments came in "from a large number of farmers covering a wide territory." Success led to a second 5-day campaign in November (Annual Report, 1925).

In East Tennessee, the College of Agriculture established a working relationship with WNOX, Knoxville. First official mention is in the annual report of G. B. Shivery, Extension forester, who reported a 22-minute radio speech during American Forest Week in April, 1927. Shivery also rewrote "a 600-word paper" and sent it to the State Commissioner of Agriculture as "part of a Farm Series for broadcasting from Nashville station" (Annual Report, 1927). This subject matter specialist apparently had a knack for publicity. For a number of years, beginning in 1930, he mentions in his reports that he "gave a talk in the course in Public Relations" before juniors and seniors at the university (Annual Report, 1930).

"Radio" seems to have formally entered the Extension education vocabulary in 1930. The first annual report section subtitled "Radio" appeared in the District IV (East Tennessee) home demonstration report indicating that a young girl had given a talk on Tennessee 4-H garden work on the national 4-H Club program broadcast from Washington during February. 4-H also was featured on WSM, Nashville, when outstanding members appeared on a program in November. Another East Tennessee advance was in Sullivan County where Gena Snodderly, home demonstration agent, had announcements of club meetings broadcast on WOPI, Bristol. This year also marked the first official listing of agents' radio talks in the Annual State Statistical Report. Thirteen talks were reported (Annual Report, 1930).

Although at least one agent was using the medium for publicizing other educational activities, the general view was that it was an educational tool and the newspapers were for publicity. In this light, Oma Worley, District IV home demonstration agent, observed, "Broadcasting has not been found practical so far." However, she reported that at a 1931 Sullivan County meeting 90 of 100 people present had radios or access to one (Annual Report, 1931).

A bumper crop of Extension radio programs was reported for WNOX in 1931. Subject-matter specialists from the state office on campus began a regularly scheduled series. Talks included topics in forestry, produce marketing, farm management, home canning, garden and orchard work, kitchen sanitation, and clothing (Annual Report, 1931).

WTJS, Jackson, joined the Extension programming lineup that year with "Correct Farming and Home Making for West Tennessee." District and area county agents voiced the 30-minute program each Monday. District agent Nichols reported "favorable comments and many questions each week" (Annual Report, 1931).

"Radio programs, not alone for club work, but for the Extension Service as a whole, have been a greater factor this year than formerly." Growing administrative awareness of the young medium's potential is reflected in this 1932 comment by the state Boys 4-H Club Leader, who went on to say, "So far the demands for farm and home radio programs have apparently come only from owners of broadcasting stations." Others reported that "stations in Memphis, Jackson, Nashville, Knoxville and Bristol have been generous in giving time on the air for talks on home demonstration work." WNOX and WOPI requested regular programs, so home demonstration agents provided 15 talks, "sometimes using outstanding women and girls . . . to tell some phase of demonstration work" (Annual Report, 1932).

Not all radio coverage was favorable. In its first decades, the Extension Service was often attacked as it tried to establish its role in local communities. In the early 1930s, its Middle Tennessee opponents apparently grasped the power of media; and, as A. B. Harmon, District II agent, reported, information antagonistic to Extension activities was published and broadcast (Annual Report, 1932).

Radio Becomes an Official Information Tool

Until 1933, Extension radio work had been from the grassroots, with agents and specialists taking the initiative or responding to requests for programming. The editorial office of the College of Agriculture had emphasized use of print media for publicity and apparently had done little or no work with radio. However, the society-jarring effect of the Great Depression and the following New Deal shook the office into the electronic era.

Agricultural Adjustment Act

Direct federal intervention in the nation's farms began with passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1933. The "Triple A" (AAA, Agricultural Adjustment Administration) carried out the program of crop restrictions and price supports. However, it was the Extension Service, with an established local organization, that was called on to inform the farmer about this new government service (Kelsey & Hearn, 1963).

One way of informing the public was a USDA radio script service that states localized and distributed to their cooperating radio stations. This USDA script service, called "Farm Flashes," was not new. Along with "Housekeepers Chats," which Tennessee Extension began using in October, 1934, and the "Radio Farm School," it had been started by the department's new Radio Service in 1926 (Baker, 1981; Annual Report, 1934).

Tennessee Extension editor Almon Sims explained the effect of this new job of mailing 6 days' worth of scripts every week:

Since passage of the Farm Adjustment Act in May these programs have been devoted almost exclusively to explaining the various phases of the AAA crop and livestock adjustment plans. . . . Reports from all stations show good response. . . from farm listeners which has somewhat dispelled the skepticism which we formerly had about the worthwhileness of the radio as an Extension informational and publicity medium. When the pressure of work in connection with the present emergency is over we hope to be able to more fully develop and improve this service (Annual Report, 1933).

The goal for these scripts was to have farm and home agents add local information and voice them.

In 1930, the USDA Office of Information decided the best strategy was "to bring the local stations into closer relation, not with Washington, but with the state agricultural college and its extension field force." To this end, the office created the job of Extension radio specialist and Alan Dailey "for several years lived out of a suitcase as he made the rounds of the agricultural colleges" (Baker, 1981). Dailey first set his suitcase down in Knoxville in May, 1934. He accompanied editor Sims and agents on visits to cooperating stations WNBR, Memphis; WTJS Jackson; WSIX, Springfield; WSM, Nashville, WDOD, Chattanooga; WNOX, Knoxville; and WOPI, Bristol (Annual Report, 1934).

4-H Youth Programs

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, a favorite subject for Extension radio was the success stories of youth in the 4-H

program. 4-H'ers Elizabeth Longmire of Anderson County and John Poteat of Washington County spoke to the nation on the "National Farm and Home Hour" in 1930 and 1933. They were followed in 1935 by a group of 4-H'ers, agents, and singers (Annual Reports, 1930, 1933, 1935). This daily NBC network program, originating from Chicago, devoted each Saturday to national farmer organizations, 4-H and vocational agriculture (Baker, 1981).

A racial barrier was broken on this program in April, 1939, when two black 4-H boys from West Tennessee were featured. As reported by W. H. Williamson, assistant state agent in Negro county agent work, "Since this was a regular 4-H Club program . . . and the first Saturday in April was the only Negro program of the year, most of the States of the south were listening in on this program and many favorable comments were received" (Annual Report, 1939).

Achievement Day broadcasts each November were popular 4-H programs in Memphis and Nashville. G. L. Herrington, state 4-H Boys Club leader, explained the programs "help to keep club work before the public and cause the boys . . . to put forth greater effort to excel . . ." (Annual Report, 1933). Such public exposure was crucial because 4-H was seen as a way to reach into homes and the future to help people live better lives.

By 1938, the Achievement Day programs had become major productions. Sam Carson, assistant editor, wrote a timed continuity script and, in Nashville where he was stationed, directed the program at WSM. WMC and WROL, Knoxville, also broadcast the program under direction of district agents. Area 4-H agents and youths rehearsed the scripts and presented the programs, which included live music performances (Annual Report, 1938).

In 1941, 4-H activities benefited from innovative uses of radio technology when WSM produced remote broadcasts from three different Nashville-area events. Part of the 4-H Club Officers' Convention was broadcast from the War Memorial auditorium (WSM also supported this by paying some of the youths' expenses). Twenty-minute broadcasts from the Junior State Dairy Show in Murfreesboro and the 4-H Tobacco Show in Franklin were relayed to Nashville by shortwave transmitter in the fall (Annual Report, 1941).

The War Effort

World War II shifted Extension's and its audience's focus

from the fields and forests of Tennessee to the battlefields of the world. Extension radio signed on full force for the war effort. A sampling of what the Extension editor had to say about that effort provides an interesting study in propaganda to mobilize the domestic front:

An acceleration of radio activities grew with the defense programs which moved rapidly toward war conditions before December 7. . . . It is our purpose to include information from any governmental agency which will be of material benefit in transmitting to people of rural areas that might further the war effort. . . . All "Farm Flash" scripts included whatever was considered advisable by the State USDA War Board, to be presented to the farm public over radio. . . . The press, radio stations and farm journals rendered a valuable service in helping. . . (farm families) with reaching Food for Freedom goals and in carrying out other programs to aid the war effort (Annual Reports, 1941, 1942, 1943).

The WSM Connection

The editorial report for 1938 said WSM led in coverage and Extension program participation. Audience figures showed average listeners for the "Farm Flashes" script, which was part of the state Department of Agriculture's daily program, at 100,000. Homemaker's talks had a weekly audience of 75,000. The report adds, "(O)ur polls in Middle Tennessee counties indicate a constant listening range of 36,000."

Several reasons can be given for this prominence. The station had the state's only clear-channel allocation. It had the benefit of the state Department of Agriculture in the state capital. But, most important for Extension work was the presence of Sam Carson, who had been stationed in Nashville in 1935 for the express purpose of working with the Nashville media (Annual Report, 1935).

Homemakers Chats—District II Home Demonstration Agent Helen Cullens began a Saturday morning 15-minute talk for homemakers in 1935 and continued it for about 12 years. The scripts for this program were reproduced and sent to other agents for their local use either in radio or other publicity. This program and the daily "Farm Flashes" were regularly rebroadcast on WAPO, Chattanooga, for several years. The widespread success of Cullens' program, even beyond Tennessee's borders, required development of a system to fill information requests. The bulk of these were from farm women. In three months of 1937, 1200 requests came from 14 states, the farthest being South Dakota (Annual Report, 1935, 1936, 1937).

An early attempt at audience evaluation was carried out to

learn about the effect of Cullens' program. Assistant editor Carson explained:

Early in the year (1937) with the cooperation of Miss Cullen and home agents of District Two, a questionnaire was submitted 1250 farm women, asking their preferences as radio listeners. . . . The main value derived from this survey is the knowledge that this cross-section of farmer-listeners approves straight, informative talks by persons capable of giving such information (Annual Report, 1937).

WSM-UT Program—In 1937, arrangements were made for a twice-weekly program from a studio on the University of Tennessee campus to be transmitted by landline to WSM. A university-wide committee, representing all departments and divisions, was responsible for the broadcasts. About one in five programs dealt with agriculture and home economics. In its second year the schedule expanded to Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and was being listened to by about 50 schools regularly. The program continued live until 1949 when taping started. Production of the show continued into the 1970s (Annual Reports, 1937, 1938; Sweet, 1974).

John McDonald—In 1945, WSM's one and only farm director, John McDonald, began "Noontime Neighbors" that was to run for 27 years. He immediately began hosting Extension workers and their clients. Later in his career he was quoted, "Within a hundred miles of Nashville you can't find a county agent, vo ag teacher, soil conservationist, FHA or ASCS official who hasn't been on a WSM program" (Baker, 1981).

An early innovation in the McDonald-Extension broadcast partnership was use of transcriptions. In November,

. . . it was decided to experiment with two to three programs a week . . . to use a wire recorder and go directly to the county, where the county agent would select two farmers whose records of improved practices demonstrated Extension programs and fit well into the county program . . . This use of the wire recorder on the scene adds realism and makes the broadcast very effective (Annual Report, 1945).

Transcription Services

Possibly the first transcription produced by the Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service was on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act. In an "all-round promotion effort," seven radio stations broadcast programs with local agents, pioneer demonstrators, 4-H members, and state staff. A 5-minute recording of anniversary remarks by Director C. E. Brehm was made for use by radio stations, and at community and 4-H Club meetings on public address equipment. Six discs were cut for circulation in 1939 (Annual Report, 1939).

Predating the WSM field recording work by 5 years was the

use of transcriptions on WMC's "Mid-South Farm Program." Memphis-area agents regularly appeared on the program. When they could not be there in person at 6:30 a.m., they had the option of recording their comments (Annual Report, 1940).

The USDA began a bimonthly 8- to 10-minute transcription service in 1944. These transcriptions were distributed through the Nashville radio office to WMC, WTJS, WLAC (Nashville), WJZM (Clarkesville), WAPO (Chattanooga), WHUB (Cookeville), WNOX and WKPT (Kingsport). When they were "enthusiastically received," the state radio office began exploring the possibility of using a wire recorder to localize this service (Annual Report, 1944). A year later. . .

Discussions were held. . . as to the practicability of employing recordings which would give information on women's work, and also on 4-H Club activities. Wire recordings should be particularly effective at fairs and cooperative shows and sales. . . (Annual Report, 1945).

Finally, in 1949, Sims could report,

The department has a tape recorder and several agents have either wire or tape recorders which are being used to get 'on the spot' programs and to make recordings for scheduled station programs when it is necessary for the agents or specialists to fill other engagements at the time of the broadcast (Annual Report).

The Golden Age Ends

Much has been said about radio's "Golden Age" when it brought a rapidly changing world into the homes of Americans who were suffering from future shock years before its diagnosis. Radio was a creature of a technological, socio-cultural, and economic crossroad. However, its golden sheen lasted only a quarter century until its little brother television overpowered it, or so common wisdom goes. Out of fears of its demise in the 1950s rose the phoenix of a changed medium. It was more local, more personal, and more common. That commonness leads Americans to take radio for granted today.

Extension and the Changed Medium

Just like the medium it had worked with so closely, Cooperative Extension was beginning to experience a role change in the 1950s. Its client population of rural people and farmers was diminishing in the face of streamlined agriculture and the pull of city employment (Beale, 1974). Like radio, Extension could be taken for granted because it had succeeded at becoming common. It had helped improve rural life to the

point that there was little difference between town and country.

As the audience for Extension changed, the need to use mass media increased. The first Tennessee television stations went on the air in the late 1940s and Extension agents were there with programs. From agents' first appearances on WMC-TV in 1949, more and more attention was paid to the use of the medium (Annual Report, 1949).

Simultaneously, it was getting harder to get the Extension message on the air. As early as 1938, assistant editor Sam Carson had commented that depending on commercial stations with no paid guarantee of time caused irregularity in transmitting information to the public (Annual Report, 1938). This continues until today with a nationwide USDA policy to avoid buying air time.

Three Decades of Service

Radio did not "roll over and play dead" in the face of change. Neither did Extension radio services. As a matter of fact, Tennessee Extension radio use increased drastically as small market stations began proliferating in the late '40s (Annual Report, 1946).

With the acquisition of recording equipment, the University of Tennessee's Department of Agricultural Information was able to service more of these small market stations through agents and directly. Beginning in the 1950s, taped programs were packaged and sent to stations. Among the programs still produced today are "Farm and Home Briefs," which includes a tape and script packet; and "The Tennessee Home Garden Show" and "Better Farming in Tennessee," both produced in conjunction with the university's WUOT. The most successful current service is the actuality, distributed to 60 percent of the Tennessee Radio Network's stations via its Agrinet. Twenty other stations receive taped actualities by mail (Mays, 1984).

The Extension Radio Philosophy

Much of the early philosophy of assistant editor Sam Carson still holds true for today's Extension radio efforts:

Supplementary to the printed word is radio. Our use of it seems to be chiefly as a means of attracting farm families to our county and home agents, to obtain advice, or to be enrolled in various projects. A secondary use of radio in this state may be employed well by enlisting the aid of club boys and girls, and farmers and farm women, for periodical appearances over various radio stations, on programs supervised by

extension workers . . . Extension radio programs . . . appear to serve best when establishing contacts for extension workers, and, if given at the time when there is a maximum of rural listeners, are immensely valuable in supplementing news stories, in stimulating interest and, probably the most important of all arousing enough interest to cause the listener to visit his county agent. Radio talks cannot go into much detail. They seem more effective when they give highlights and create a desire for information (Annual Report, 1936).

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